

Archived Information

Interim Evaluation of the Northeast and Islands Laboratory at Brown University

I. Brief Overview of Laboratory

The LAB serves a very large and complex region encompassing New England, New York, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. This region spans over 2,500 linear miles from the Canadian borders to the Caribbean Sea. The northeast region also includes major cities like New York, Hartford, Bridgeport, Boston and Providence. And yet, these urban enclaves border some of the most rural areas of the country. For example, while New York City has a population larger than the states of Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont combined, the state of New York contains nearly half the rural population of all the states in the region.

The region is also disparate in terms of wealth. Connecticut has the highest per capita income in the United States, and three other states in the region are in the top ten. On the other hand, Maine ranks twenty-seventh among the fifty states, and the per capita income in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands are well below those of any other state.

The LAB at Brown University is one of ten regional laboratories. The Brown REL was awarded a five year contract in 1995 by the U.S. Department of Education through the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, (OERI). The lab headquarters is in Providence, Rhode Island. This year marks the third year contract period. The purpose of the interim evaluation is twofold. First is to assess the performance of each of the ten REL during the first three years of their 1995 - 2000 contract. The second objective is to provide useful information and guide program improvement during the remainder of the contract term.

The Office of the Undersecretary awarded a contract to Decision Information Resources, Inc, (DIR), to conduct an interim evaluation of the Regional Education Laboratories.

Functional areas of the Laboratory operations considered included:

- Applied research and development
- Service to the field
- Strategic alliances and networking.
- Specialty area.

The Laboratory was evaluated independently by a panel of six peer reviewers. The peer review panel was required to participate in three training sessions.

Session #1 provided an introduction of DIR staff to panel members. Additionally, background was provided on the REL program, and the Interim Evaluation. The LAB - specific training session informed panelists about their role and responsibilities. We discussed standards, confidentiality and other related information regarding the interim evaluation.

Session #2 provided participants with an understanding of the evaluation framework including evaluation questions, evaluation indicators, and data sources.

Session #3 provided detailed contextual and factual information about the Laboratory to be evaluated. It was also to resolve questions related to the evaluation indicators and data sources, including panelist final report format.

Peer Reviewers were required to review advance materials prior to the on-site visit to the LAB May 23 through May 28, 1999. The materials prepared by the LAB at Brown included the proposal, revised plan of work, modifications, reports, publications, and examples of products produced by the LAB Signature Works #1 and #2 synthesis from projects.

The training offered in-depth opportunities for interactive conversation with DIR staff, and other peer reviewers. The LAB's staff was included in for a 30-minute segment of training session #3.

II. Implementation and Management

A. To what extent is the LAB doing what they were approved to do during the first three contract years?

1. Strengths

The LAB has implemented programs in a timely manner.

LAB has met contractual agreements.

The LAB is a part of Brown University, an institution renowned for its commitment to public service education. Brown is the home of the Taubman Center for Public Policy, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Education Alliance for Equity and Excellence in the Nations' Schools.

The LAB attempts to improve teaching and learning and advance systematic school enhancement by increasing the capacity for reform and by forming strategic alliances with key members of the region's educational and policy making community. One of the ways in which the Lab puts these strategies into effect is by conducting its research in collaboration with educational practitioners and community members.

Knowledge gained through inquiries into standards and assessment, school services, products, and community involvement, is exchanged with policymakers through the publications, computer media and LAB facilitated workshops.

LAB views excellence and equity as two equally important guiding principles, and develops effective approaches for meeting the educational needs of linguistically and culturally diverse student populations. The work is based on self-assessments and needs assessments that the LAB conducts through conferencing with the board of governors, and with members of professional organizations and commissioners in State Departments of Education.

2. Areas of needed improvement

The LAB serves a very large diverse and complex region. However the LAB staffing and Board of Governors needs to reflect more of the diverse populations living in the region. There is a lack of Native Americans, Hispanics, and Blacks. Inclusion of such populations in such capacities would enhance the LAB and its work. No one group can be all things to all people.

3. Recommendations for improvement

- Increase efforts to identify, recruit, develop, and retain outstanding members of the staff who are representatives of the diverse population within the region.

B. To what extent is the REL using a self- monitoring process to plan and adapt activities in response to feedback and customer needs?

1. Strengths

The LAB's self-assessment is collecting data on clients and staff interactive activities.

Abt associates reviewed all existing monthly reports, project plans, or design plans. Those documents represent the proposed work scope and research (available in electronic or hard copy versions) for work that is being carried out by LAB staff.

Communicates with relevant REL's to improve the effectiveness of the process to insure quality assurance.

2. Recommendations for improvement

A centralized database established to store copies, projects, and actions. This recommendation must continue to be followed.

III. Quality

To what extent is the LAB, developing high quality products and services?

1. Strengths

LAB staff designed a professional development process and facilitated the sessions, using qualitative research methods to address two research questions:

- What issues arise when schools include English language learners in standard implementation efforts?
- What professional development strategies prepare schools to respond to this challenge?

Examples:

LAB staff keeps a running account of presentations and interactions with teachers.

Agendas for these meetings, handouts and readings were achieved. Using questionnaires on teaching, learning, and their perceptions of the sessions are additional data collected from the sessions.

Work is research-based and methodically sound.

Activities and proposed products align with the scope of work. Budget allocations are appropriate and reasonable with work plans assuring effective implementation of the viable results.

LAB support national dissemination efforts

Example:

The LAB contributes to the development of a nationwide system that improves access to the best available information from research and practice. By participating in the nationwide system of education information and assistance and restructuring of secondary schools.

Laboratory networking program

Federal efforts to improve teaching and learning in the nation's schools have been well received by the LAB.

2. Areas of needed improvement

Research questions need to be initiated and explored in places other than initial sites receptive to LAB's involvement.

3. Recommendations for improvement

There is a need for more dissemination efforts on the local, state and regional level of products and services.

IV. Utility

A. To what extent are the products and services provided by the laboratory useful to, and used by customers?

1. Strengths

LAB has systems for ongoing improvement.

Example:

The LAB is dedicated to continuing to improve its effectiveness with urban education reform. The LAB works with schools and communities in urban settings to evaluate existing strategic reform, and to conduct on-site research in schools.

Educational Signature Work #1 and #2:

Works address regional needs and areas of national significance.

Systemic reform contributes to promoting equality for culturally and linguistically diverse populations.

Work aligns with goals and initiatives of the LAB. Knowledge and services are readily used in a variety of forms by intended audiences. Work lends itself to scaling up of effective models and practices.

2. Areas of needed improvement

Make products/materials more reader friendly and useful to customers. RMC displayed and presented a most colorful presentation.

3. Recommendations for improvement

Develop a plan to reach more customers on all levels.

B. To what extent is the LAB focused on customer needs?

1. Strengths

Testimonial indicates that the Lab is meeting customer needs with great degree of satisfaction. State Liaisons build strong partnerships with state and district representatives who are active partners in planning and carrying out reform activities. The LAB's functions are an integral part of the system of educational reform in the Northeast and Islands region.

2. Areas of needed improvement

The LAB is challenged to develop a comprehensive assessment to guide future programs.

The state/island system creates partnerships with educational leaders in each state and island. LAB liaisons are currently engaged in documenting the effectiveness of magnet school programs.

3. Recommendation for improvement

Increase efforts to reach more customers by use of the internet mailing list and web pages.

V. Outcomes and Impact

A. To what extent is the REL's work contributing to improve student success, particularly in intensive implementation sites?

1. Strengths

- LAB recognizes that student achievement and other student outcomes are an important focus for LAB programs and activities.
- NYC CPAC - a project designed to build capacity of parents to be leaders in the New York City schools.
- Empowerment zones/ enterprising communities and schools-to-career reports the result of research on investigating the link between school-to-career and EZ/EC.
- Knowing and Doing- connecting learning and work, reviews high quality learning strategies, including a comprehensive overview of project based opportunities for students.

Facilitating Change: Addressing the Issue of Overrepresentation in Special Education

The work of the Equity Center focuses on facilitating change in schools to help students obtain Equal Access to education. One example is the approaches manifested in South Kingston, RI. We help spark the change process by leading support to development of a Diversity Task Force.

Over thirty members that include principals, school, parents, committee members and local university officials join together in a community-based effort to influence educational policy.

The task force is a response to an OCR complaint filed earlier in 1998 on the overrepresentation of minority students in special education reports released to the superintendent in January. Four hundred and seven children of color enrolled in the system; over 40 percent received special education services. The total school system enrolls 4,200 students.

The work of the Task Force is twofold to provide policy recommendations to the town's school committee, and understand their own attitudes about culture, race, and religion.

The community members formed work groups that focused on five critical areas for the school policies to address: standards for high school graduation; diversity awareness, and recruitment; racism and classism; curriculum and information; and, parent community involvement. They formed mixed race study circles to begin an opening dialogue about these issues.

The challenge is to cultivate understanding between different groups in order to serve all children. This diversity task force has held two retreats, facilitated by Brown University's Equity Assistance Center.

Sensitivity Training, and Increasing Outreach Efforts to Parents

A conference to discuss the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education is being planned. The Equity Center's involvement has been at the beginning of the process. The work of the Task Force promises to show both long and short term rewards.

2. Area of needed improvement

The Lab needs to include multiple measures of student outcomes in research plans.

3. Recommendations for improvement

Continue to maintain and modify the plan for student outcomes to best inform policy, and best practices.

B. To what extent does the laboratory assist states/localities to implement comprehensive school improvement strategies?

1. Strengths

Example:

In the past two years, a number of significant initiatives to restructure secondary schools have begun in the Northeast and Island region. The New England Association of Schools and College's Commission on Public Secondary Schools has decided to use the School Accreditation process to improve teaching and learning in high schools.

The commissioner of education has made high school restructuring a priority by forming a commission to explore and recommend how Maine's secondary schools should change.

LAB partner Jobs for the Future (JFF) has placed a strong emphasis exploring how school-to-career initiatives can be used to improve high school experiences for all students. The Metropolitan Career and Technical Center, a new high school in Providence, Rhode Island has been identified as one of the most innovative high schools in the country. This has been designated as the laboratory school for new Urban High Schools project of the Federal Department of Education.

2. Areas for Improvement

Study the impact of accreditation and standards, assessment, and accountability.

3. Recommendation for Improvement

Increase awareness, diversity and recruitment, and other stakeholders.

C. To what extent has the REL made progress in establishing a regional and national reputation in its specialty area?

1. Strengths

Linguistic and Cultural Diversity

Work on language and cultural diversity influences each of the major initiatives.

Support programs sustain and connect the Lab's work.

Initiate group related projects and define the Lab work's major directions.

National recognition of Nanduti! Visit Nanduti to discover the web of early language.

Learn how children learn languages; learn the benefits of starting early. Answer questions about Quality language programs.

Policy Recommendation's have been adopted (CPAC: NESAC)

2. Areas of needed improvement

Develop a strategy to gain more national exposure.

3. Recommendation for improvement

In combination with a dissemination plan, use technology to scale-up those successful programs.

VI. Overall Evaluation of Total LAB Programs, Products and Services

Programs, Products and Services

It was apparent to the Peer Review Panel that the LAB at Brown has established itself as one of the leading laboratories in the nation.

The Starting Point for School Reform: "Americans...expect strict standards to govern construction of buildings, bridges, highways and tunnels; shoddy work would put lives at risk.

They expect stringent standards to protect their drinking water, the food they eat and the air they breathe...Standards are created because they improve the quality of life." (Ravitch, 1995).

"Standards, Equity and Cultural Diversity", a product developed by the LAB, is worthwhile reading. The LAB's mission is a reality. REL work with states and localities seeking to promote implementation of broad based comprehensive school improvement strategies designed to achieve the National Educational Goals through providing information, training, technical assistance, and applied research.

The Lab conducts development and applied research resulting in tested programs and materials.

VII. Broad Summary of Strengths, Areas for Improvement, and Strategies for Improvement

The LAB continues to build on Brown University's, activist tradition in education. The institutional resources and systems, their commitment to excellence, and having a home within an established institution, have aided the LAB's rapid development.

New York City Broad-Based Consultation, a public engagement project was developed to improve strategies for promoting system-wide planning and implementation of school based management teams in 1100 schools. RMC was on site and gave an in-depth presentation of the "hands-on" work, and great outcome of this most important project.

Implementing Standards with ELLs on-site presentation, and prior review of Signature Work 1. The peer review panel was afforded the opportunity to hold a teleconference with a commissioner from the State of Maine. We were provided with a much clearer view of the States commitment and the role of the LAB.

The State Liaison System

Interviews with Rhode Island, Virgin Islands and Puerto Rican workers who explained their direct connection on the state level aided this panelist in better understanding the importance of the State Liaison System.

2. Areas for Improvement

- To more effectively utilize the knowledge and strengths of Brown University.
- Increase efforts in the area of Learners with Disabilities.
- There are some examples of work in the Boston Public School curricular Framework and Standards.

3. Strategies for Improvement

- The LAB, in future planning of improving teaching and learning, should include all Stakeholders in education reform.
- Incorporate additional, effective uses of technology to support and explore the impact of successful programs.
- Increase Partnership for Family involvement in education, including fathers.
- Increase community involvement.

"Communities that have good schools and better educated residents are safer more stable communities where businesses and families thrive. These communities can be magnets, for new business and jobs."

"Education is key to a strong local economy, good quality of life and a brighter future for everyone."

"Partnership for Family Involvement in Education"